

Center for Children's Advocacy

TESTIMONY OF THE CO-CHAIRS OF THE FAMILIES WITH SERVICE NEEDS (FWSN) ADVISORY BOARD, MARTHA STONE, J.D. AND PRESTON BRITNER, Ph.D.

BEFORE THE COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION IN SUPPORT OF RAISED S.B. NO. 278, AN ACT CONCERNING TRUANCY

MARCH 1, 2010

This testimony is submitted on behalf of the Co-Chairs of the Families With Service Needs (FWSN) Advisory Board, which was created by section 42 of Public Act 06-188, to address issues relating to juvenile status offenders. Co-Chair Preston Britner is an Associate Professor of Human Development and Family Studies, Educational Psychology, and Public Health at the University of Connecticut; Co-Chair Martha Stone is the Executive Director of the Center for Children's Advocacy at the University of Connecticut School of Law.

In 2008, the FWSN Advisory Board promulgated the "Report to the Connecticut Assembly"¹, which includes "Recommendations related to Truancy Prevention/Truancy Intervention"², some of which are explicitly set forth in Raised.S.B. 278. These Recommendations had been developed by the Truancy Subcommittee of the Board, a group of educators, policymakers, truancy specialists, and advocates who were specifically tasked with addressing the unique needs of truant students.

According to CSSD data³, there were 800 FWSN Truancy referrals for the 2008-2009 school year. 238 of these referrals came from the Connecticut's four largest cities: Bridgeport, Hartford, New Haven, and Waterbury. Of these 238 referrals, 131 occurred in the latter four months of the school year: March, April, May, and June.



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Raised S.B. 278 Should Be Passed for the Following Three Reasons:

1. Mandating Schools to File FWSNs Within 15 Days After Parents Fail to Cooperate with Schools Regarding Their Child's Truancy Problem Will Enable More Students to Get Services Quicker and Will Prevent Further Absences

Current law C.G.S §10-198a requires superintendents of schools to file Family With Service Needs complaints with the Superior Court if:

- The student has four unexcused absences within one month or ten within one school year; AND
- The parent or other person having control of such child fails to attend the meeting the school is required to hold after this number of truantries; OR

¹ The report can be found at: http://www.cga.ct.gov/kid/fwsn/fwsn_report_0208.pdf.

² Id. at 66-69.

³ See Attachment A.

- Otherwise fails to cooperate with the school in attempting to solve the student's truancy problem

A certain measure of discretion is given to schools in determining if a parent or guardian is "cooperating" with the school in solving the truancy problem, and this bill does not alter that discretion.. However, the fact remains that if a school does intend to file a FWSN complaint, they must do so in a timely fashion. Unfortunately, this timeliness is rare.

Current '08-'09 CSSD statistics show a spike in FWSN filings in the months of March, April, and May.⁴ Providers who run truancy diversion programs, and probation officers who work with the FWSN population, explain that by the time they start working with those youth referred, the student's number of absences has far exceeded the "truant" threshold⁵. Further, the youth and their families have missed out on the chance to access a broad array of services available to the FWSN population that could have prevented these additional absences, including: referral to Family Support Centers, educational advocacy, mental health services, afterschool programs, parenting classes, and other supports. In order for youth and families to access services and address their truancy problem as quickly as possible, school superintendents must be required to file FWSN complaints in an expedited fashion.

2. Requiring the State Department of Education to Uniformly Define "Unexcused" and "Excused" Absences Will Result In More Accurate and Effective Data Collection and Analysis and Hold School Systems More Accountable In Decreasing Their Truancy Rates.

Currently, school districts each have their own unique policy as to what constitutes "excused" and "unexcused" absences. This results in extremely inconsistent application throughout the state in determining whether or not an absence should be reported as excused or unexcused. For example, in some cities and towns, family vacation time is considered a valid reason to excuse an absence, while in other districts it is not excused.

Without this section uniformly defining absences, the 2009 bill amending Conn. Gen. Stat. §10-220 to require local and regional boards of education to include "attendance and unexcused absences" data in their reporting to the State Department of Education is useless, as there is no uniform definition of what differentiates an "excused" versus an "unexcused" absence.⁶ Therefore, no meaningful analysis can be gleaned from this data and school systems cannot be held accountable for decreasing their truancy rates.

3. Requiring the State Department of Education to Report to the Governor and the General Assembly on Truancy Data and School District Truancy Programs Will Result In Better Coordination of Truancy Reduction Efforts and Greater Accountability of School Districts to Address Truancy

⁴ See Attachment B, CSSD PowerPoint, "Family With Service Needs Update" for FWSN Advisory Board Meeting, Jan. 26, 2010, at Legislative Office Building.

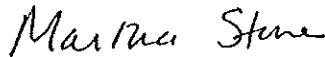
⁵ C.G.S. §10-198a(a): "Truant" means a child age five to eighteen, inclusive, who... has four unexcused absences from school in any one month or ten unexcused absences from school in any school year.

⁶ C.G.S. §10-220

Since 2006, the FWSN Advisory Board has taken the lead in coordinating, supporting, and organizing statewide truancy initiatives because the State Department of Education had no repository of such information. As of June 2010, this Advisory Board will cease to exist. It is imperative that the SDE take on the responsibility of coordinating the statewide efforts to reduce truancy. This coordination will help school districts ascertain what other districts are doing to increase school attendance, facilitate collaboration amongst programs aimed at achieving the same results, and add an accountability factor. Other states have created strong administrative bodies to coordinate truancy efforts. The most comprehensive illustration is Washington State's "Becca Task Force," which was created in 2002 in support of the "Becca Laws" which address "truancy, at-risk youth, and children in need of services."⁷

In addition to coordination and oversight of truancy programs, Raised S.B. 278 addresses reporting of truancy data and programs. Last year's amendment to C.G.S. §10-220 requires local and regional school districts to report to the State Department of Education on truancy data and truancy programs. Raised S.B. 278 extends the reporting requirement from the SDE to the Governor and General Assembly. This extension in reporting broadens the conversation about truancy solutions to wider audiences, and will result in increased accountability by school districts to state officials and legislators to develop effective and creative ways to combat the problem of truancy.

Respectfully submitted,



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⁷ See <http://wabeccataskforce.org/> for more information.